



Interview with Wes Skiles

Wes Skiles interview with Agnes offers an insightful look at her passion, obsession and involvement with cave diving.

What do you consider to be the "genesis" of your exploration career?

I got my first taste of laying line in Florida's cave country and from that point I've been hooked. The moment I realized that the cave does not end just because the line does - that was a watershed moment. I suddenly saw all kinds of possibilities and potential. Suddenly I was finding new cave everywhere.

It is a phenomenal feeling to reach a place that no other human has ever seen before. Nothing can beat the moment you unwind a reel into completely new and un-chartered territory. One feels pure, unadulterated joy and happiness, all peppered with a bit of a thrill. When you experience these feelings once, searching for the next opportunity to explore virgin passage is a given.

Was there anything in your life that was instrumental in the development of the explorer psyche?

When I was a kid I loved books and stories about explorers and dreamed that one day I would do the same thing, that I would discover new things and new places. As I grew up the childhood fantasies gave way to skepticism and seemingly an adult reality - everything has been found, the prying eyes of man have been everywhere. So I gave up the dream, as most people do and

simply read books about how others did it. It took cave diving to make me realize there is still so much to find and explore. That there are still places on earth that no human - ever - has gazed upon.

I'm so glad that I was wrong and that we haven't scratched the surface, literally. There aren't places above water, above ground where humans have not ventured. One would really struggle to be in a spot where no human ever has set foot before and Google Earth has further taken away all mystery. Yet exploration, in the true sense of the word is still possible underground. When going into a virgin cave, no one, absolutely no one can tell you what is around the corner, what to expect and how you can prepare. Caves are the final frontier and there is so much left to discovered and explored.

Solo or buddy diving - feelings about both.

I am at my most relaxed in the water when I solo dive. I know where I am at and I can control everything about the dive. The fact is that your buddy is often the weakest link - I always end up watching them like a hawk, spending more time with my eyes glued to them than the cave. It is nice to only have to worry about yourself and what you want to do and experience. Some of the places I go into a buddy is definitely a liability... there is no room for two in small, tight, silty places!

There are exceptions however, there are people with whom sharing a dive is a real pleasure. Being as comfortable diving with someone as I am diving by myself is very rare and when it does happen is pretty incredible. My favorite cave diving buddy has got to be James Toland, we make a very good team and it seems can achieve anything underwater together. He knows his stuff, we have the same goals and we understand each other under water. Off course fine tuning this relationship took time, our first dive together was a comedy of errors, as two essentially solo divers tried to dive together. We were in the same cave on the same day - we were together at the start, met up 6000ft back and then again on deco.

Having said all that I am always happy to dive with other people, especially if they are good mates. Fun dives mucking about with friends and racing to the pub afterwards are just as important as the exploration dives.

On one of your final dives in Baptizing you got stuck. How did it happen? How did you manage to free yourself? Did you learn anything from the experience?

I was in a fissure crack that seemed to go on forever. I was traveling tipped to one side as the passage wasn't big enough to swim through comfortably. Then finally at the end of crack, there was a small round hole on the bottom. I looked at it and thought, that's the end of the road. On first glance it looked too small to get into and it curved around the corner so I couldn't see where and if it went. So I tied off the reel, put on my arrow and was about to head back when I looked

at the hole one more time and thought - you pussy, go check it out. I unclipped my tanks, one forward, one back and in I went, wedging myself into the hole and around the corner.

Long story short it didn't go and I had to get out backwards. It was the shape of the passage that got me and I got well and truly stuck in there. When you already have your tanks off and are doing a superman impersonation there is not much room to maneuver. The 120s I was using made it doubly difficult to juggle the tanks. Still, in the end I spent a few minutes thinking about how to get out and then did so. It involved taking one tank off completely and pushing it behind me... and then slowly bit by bit extricating myself. It took some time before I was turned around, had the gear back on and could start heading out.

What did I learn... sometimes it's ok for a cave not to go. Although I have no regrets, at least I can sleep well at night knowing that was the end of the road and I didn't miss anything.

Are you willing to die doing this?

No one wants to die but there are risks involved in cave diving. It would be criminal to say that cave diving is perfectly safe. In any inherently dangerous pursuit, if you are on the cutting edge, if you are pushing the boundaries and pushing yourself - you inevitably increase the risks. To me the risks are worth it. Diving and the need to explore is not just a hobby for me. It is not just something I love doing. It is a way of life. It is who I am. As my mum loves to say 'Where the devil can't go, he sends you.' I'm starting to think there might be some truth to that.

The pure joy and blissful happiness I get from exploration is worth taking calculated risks. It is not about doing stupid stuff in order to keep on pushing but if folks didn't dare to get out of the comfort zone nothing would ever get done. We all set our own limitations and we all do our own risk assessment. I don't think it is fair to have other people's risk assessment placed onto my shoulders. Having said that, I do appreciate that at the end of the day it is only long Gevity that counts.

Why did you take an interest in the science of cave diving - was there a watershed moment?

The watershed moment came because of my involvement with the National Geographic expedition to the Bahamas. Watching scientists working with divers and discovering just the most incredible things really opened my eyes to the more scientific aspect of cave diving. We had a plethora of scientists involved in the project from a variety of fields and to go into the caves and recover information, data and samples that were useful for their work was really cool. It showed me that there is more to cave diving than just floating around and enjoying the sheer beauty of the caves. There is so much information and knowledge to be found and discovered inside caves.

One of the most exciting moments of the trip was the recovery of the tortoise shell and crocodile

skull from Sawmill Sink. Both were a cool 3000 years old and recovered in faultless condition. Filming and photographing the event was a phenomenal experience, but it was after the dive that it got really good. It was such a thrill to watch the scientists when the boxes with the remains made it to the surface. Their eyes lit up the moment they saw the remains - they had seen nothing quite like it. Definitely a watershed moment.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years time?

I definitely want to take advantage of the next 10 years and I see myself at the very cutting edge of exploration. Exploration is about going where no man has gone before, off the charts into the unknown and coming back with new information and knowledge that might make humanity a little richer.

My goal is to create a synergy between divers and scientists. Not everyone can cave dive. Scientists especially are limited by where they can go. I would like to lead expeditions where we can bring together a bunch of scientists from a variety of fields who might actually benefit from us going down there and bringing back data.

It would be wonderful to make what I do more accessible to the mainstream public, so that folks sit on the edge of their seats waiting to hear whether an expedition was successful or not, the way it used to be back in the day. I doubt I can mobilize the interest of whole countries the way the Sheckleton did, but perhaps it is enough to inspire people to believe that there is more to be found out there and that discovery and searching for new knowledge is an exciting and worthwhile pursuit.

You take photographs, what do you get from it?

Cave diving and caving hardly pops up on the Richter scale of interest from the public. I would love to change this using visual media, through writing stories, books and articles and through my photography. To take someone deep below the earth, to show them what is down there - to expand their understanding of the world, to inspire and awe them with the beauty they didn't even know existed. That is the goal of photography... to show folks something new and exciting that they are not lucky enough to see for themselves. And for them to understand just how incredible the underwater environments really are.